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ABSTRACT

This paper explains the effectiveness of distance teaching in Sri Lanka and shows the importance of face-to-face components in distance learning to meet the needs of students and resources. Distance education in the Third World and the current status of distance education at the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) are described, and the characteristics of distance learners in Asia and Sri Lanka are noted. The results of a survey of students who had been in the OUSL distance education program are cited: (1) these students expected a learning system similar to learning taking place in conventional settings; (2) they preferred face-to-face teaching; (3) they lacked self confidence in self learning; (4) they expected continuing help and guidance from the institution; and (5) most were not used to and had no access to modern technology. The lack of autonomy, limited resources, and past experiences of the students are seen as major inhibitors to the development of distance education in Sri Lanka; and a complementary system of distance teaching and face-to-face teaching in the form of tutoring and counselling is recommended. (ALF)

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FACE-TO-FACE AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN SRI LANKA CONTRADICTORY OR COMPLEMENTARY

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INTRODUCTION :

The concept of teaching at a distance has attracted wide interest in particular from developing countries. They have found distance education an answer to the problems of taking education to a large numbers of people who have no access to conventional system of education.

This paper intends to explain the effectiveness of distance teaching in Sri Lanka and to show the importance of face-to-face components in distance learning so as to suite the needs of students and resources of Sri Lanka.

DISTANCE EDUCATION AND THE THIRD WORLD

"Distance education has the potentialities of both life-long education as well as universalization of education. It is necessary not only for eradicating mass illiteracy, but also for meeting the ever increasing demand for higher education. It is also a promising mean for equal educational opportunity and a useful medium for promoting diversified as well as vocational education. It is a source of inspiration for the disappointed and a providence for the deprived. It is therefore democratic as well as socialistic in nature".[1]

In theory it is advocated that distance education system is suitable for developing countries. But in practice it is argued that distance education like conventional system of education failed and fails to live up to it's promises. "An examination of the literature about the distance education in the third world countries, indicates that the promise of D E, which is expressed in the rhetoric, is that it can assist third world development because it is a vehicle of large scale, quality education, effecting social equality in a cost efficient manner. A critical analysis of the same literature, however demonstrated that the evidence does not indicate that in reality this has been or will be achieved".[2]

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1. Banerjee, G., "Higher Education through the Distance Education in India - A Boon or A Bane" - Paper presented at International Conference on Education and Development, Manila - November, 16-18, 1988.

2. Arger. G., "Promise and Reality" A Critical analysis of the literature available in Australia on Distance Education in the third world" University of New England, Armidale, Australia.

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As a result in Asian countries a higher rate of drop out has occured in distance education compared to conventional education. The quality of academic performance also termed as very poor.

Distance education includes some features which are quite different from teaching taking place in conventional settings. In D E teaching is contacted through print and some other forms of electronic media. It embodies self instructional principles largely learner oriented, and also it uses wider range of media. It is also called a home study system.

Therefore, the following areas must be examined when developing a D E system in an under developed country.

(a) Needs of target students,
(b) Their learning style and motivation for self learning,
(c) Access to modern technology,
(d) Facilities available for home study.

The promise of D E could be achieved if it can be adopted to the needs and resources of the developing countries.

PRESENT POSITION OF D E IN SRI LANKA :

The National Institute of Education, The National Apprenticeship Board of Sri lanka and the Open University of Sri Lanka offer distance education programmes in Sri Lanka. The concept of D E has developed comprehensively in the Open University of Sri Lanka.

Open University offers variety of courses. It ranges from general literacy programmes to degree programmes. But most of the courses are designed to meet the demand for higher education in Sri Lanka. For the first time, in Asian countries the OUSL experiments teaching Engineering Sciences at a distance.

At the very inception the OUSL experienced a higher rate of drop- out. In 1985/86 an average of 40% of drop out was apparent in all the courses. More than 75% of drop out was indicated in few courses. In 1989/90 an average of 35% of drop out was recorded in Certificate and Foundation Courses. It is noted that in 1986 the pass rate was from 20% to 60%.

DISTANT LEARNERS IN ASIA AND SRI LANKA

Distance learners are expected to be highly autonomous in their learning although the institutional support does exist.

Asian students are teacher dependent. They respect academic authority. They are eager to acquire correct knowledge and point of view and skills for passing examination.

The culturally based differences in teaching and learning style will be significant inhibitors to the development of D E in Asian countries. Learning difficulties of Asian distant students are caused by basically different teaching and learning style to those already encultured at home. "Asian students, irrespective of national or cultural orgin, exhibit more or less the same tendencies in their patterns of learning and the problems they experience".[3]

NEEDS OF STUDENTS :

Research[4] conducted among the drop out students reveal that there is a significant relationship between the learning difficulties of the students and their drop out decision.

It is found that 76% of the students had joined OUSL to get a certificate/degree for employment prospects; 12% of the students had joined OUSL to study while engaged in employment/domestic activities. Another 12% had given other reasons.

About 50% of the students had joined the OUSL with G.C.E. (A./L.) and 15% with qualifications above G.C.E. (A/L) rest of them had completed G..C.E.(O./L.) examination. They have completed their primary and secondary education under conventional system of education.

It is also found that 67% of the students fall between the age group of 20 - 30 years; 14% of the students fall between 30 - 40 years; 60% of the students were employed and 40% were not employed. More than 50% of the employed students stated that they are free on weekends to devoted time for their studies.

Those who did not get an opportunity to continue their education in particularly higher education had selected OUSL as an alternative to continue their education. Therefore, it is no wonder that they expect a learning system which is similar to learning taking place in conventional settings.

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3. Dunbar, R. "Culture Based Learning Problems of Asian Students; Some implications for Australian Distance Educators" - ASPESA Papers, No. 5. 1988.

4. Ismail A.G.H. - "A Critical Analysis on factors Influencing the drop out of students from the Courses offered b;y OUSL -" On going research Project - . This study was based on a sample of 479 students who dropped out in the academic year 1988/89. This does not reveal the present situation at the OUSL. Reasearch regarding the present situation is being continued by the same researcher.

FACE-TO-FACE TEACHING AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Research also reveals that students show a favourable attitude towards face-to-face teaching. They also lack confidence in self learning. They believe in a flexible system of learning but expect a continuing help and guidance from the institution.

Research indicates that 52% of the students have confidence in distance learning but 75% of the students reported that they had difficulties in understanding lesson material; 84% of the students are for face-to-face teaching. Researches[5] done in 1986 and 1988 also confirm this desire. The survey reveals 73% of the continuing students had requested for more day schools (Face-to- face sessions).

An interview[6] was held with 38 continuing students. They had come to OUSL to study (to prepare for their examinations) at Library and in other reading areas, as they felt lazy and no one to help in their studies at home. Few of them lacked facilities for home study. They hoped to study in groups, and also to get help from academic staff when the difficulties arise. All reside within 20 miles radius of the Central Campus.

Among them five students were employed and six students had resigned from their jobs to find more time for their studies. A better employment prospects is expected after completion of the course.

Most of the students stated that it was very easy to listen and understand the subject than reading a lesson. two students reported that they had to spend at least a day to understand a lesson. All of them need some one to help.

The students who are not employed were more favourable to face-to-face sessions. Those who are employed were in a view that they could made arrangements to attend face-to-face sessions, if the University informs the programme in advance, when registering for the courses. Employed students liked face-to-face sessions during weekends and public holidays.

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5. Report of the Sub-committee on Further Growth & Development of the OUSL - September, 1986. and

Wijeratne, W.A.R., "A Survey on Educational Needs and Problems Distance Learning Students in Sri Lanka" - 1988.

6. Ismail, A.G.H. "Opinion Survey on face-to-face Components in Distance learning - 1991.

ACCESS TO MODERN TECHNOLOGY :

"The development of quality open learning is expensive. For under developed countries this may be the greatest problem".[7] The capabilities of D E in the third world to prepare, produce and deliver programmes which would result in large quantities of skilled educated man power is seriously questioned. As a an under developed country similar conditions could be seen in Sri Lanka too. The low socio-economic conditions in Sri Lanka cannot afford sophisticated technology.

Most of the distance learners are not used to and have no access to modern technology. It is reported that 70% of the continuing students were not aware of the method of teaching adopted at OUSL at the time of joining: 75% of the students were aware of the radio programmes of the OUSL but only 12% listened this programme regularly; 85% of the students have not received any audio cassettes and 80% have not watched any video cassettes at the OUSL Regional Centres [8] **

CONCLUSION :

Physical separation from the teacher is an important aspect of distance learning. Unless the role of the teacher is supplemented by distance mode of teaching, D E cannot achieve its promise.

The limited resources and the past experiences of the students are major inhibitors for introducing a comprehensive system of D E in Sri Lanka.

Distance learners in Sri Lanka are used to conventional system of learning and also they lack confidence in self learning. They have less access to modern technology. Therefore, an alternative mode of teaching has to be introduced to supplement the short comings of D E.

"There is an overwhelming tendency within the field of teaching at a distance, to offer systems from the standpoint of the institution teaching at a distance rather than from the standpoint of the students learning at a distance. The response to the individual needs of the student learning alone and at a distance had often become lost in the over riding requirement to produce a grandiose package of materials".[9]

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7. ICCE 1982 : 68

8. Report of the Sub-Committee on Further Growth & Development of the OUSL - September, 1986.

9. Sewart, D., "Distance teaching : A Contradiction in Terms" - Teaching at a distance - 1983.

** Development has taken place in the use of audio and video material by the OUSL students over the years. 'A survey on Evaluation of, distance education support material' is being undertaken by the Evaluation and Research unit of the OUSL. This may reveal the effectiveness of support material at the OUSL.

It is therefore suggested a combined system of distance teaching and face-to-face teaching in the form of academic coaching through tutoring and counselling where the tutor does not teach the subjects in traditional way, but help the students to learn from the package of materials, either by himself or in groups.* Face- to-face sessions such as tutorial classes, day-schools, practicals, workshops could be arranged to help individual students who are in need.

This system is not contradictory to distance learning but complementary. It will be a stepping stone to group learning, self learning and also an early step of adopting to learning at a distance.

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*Some of these suggestions implemented at the OUSL seems to be effective.

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5. Evans, T. and Nation, D. "Critical reflections on D E Deakin Studies in Education series - 2, 1989.

6. Wijeratne, W.A.R., "A Survey on Educational needs and problems of distance learning students in Sri Lanka" 1988

7. Annual Report, OUSL - 1987 - 1988.

8. Report of the Sub-Committee on Further Growth & Development of OUSL. September, 1986.

9. An Inquiry into the students drop out from OUSL (J. Wanasinghe Report) November, 1989.